

Family Stories & Photos

Tunis II & Clara



Tunis Romein II (Tunie), born March 30, 1912, was named for his grandfather, Teunis Romein. Clara Sadie Romein (Clara), born May 2, 1917, was named for her two grandmothers, Clara DeMik and Sadie Romein.

Tunie and Clara grew up in Wichert, Illinois on a farm owned by their parents, Harry and Elizabeth Romein. Life was good for Tunie and Clara. They had lots of fun, but they also had to work to help their parents keep their farm going. In later years, Tunie recalled memories of his and Clara's youth in his article entitled *Recollections of Early Wichert Days*.¹ The following are excerpts from the article:

“For general summer recreation we had the dredge ditches to explore, along with Daley's Woods

a couple miles away; also butterflies and moths to catch, and Saturday afternoon baseball. Otherwise summertime was hard work with chores like gathering eggs, feeding animals, cleaning the barn, weeding and hand cultivating a couple acres of onions, hoeing corn, potatoes, melons, cabbage, and the usual harvesting of these crops. As a change of pace we sometimes went to Chicago to see the big leaguers play.

“We had cats for pets, and on one occasion a runt pig named Jonah whom I often rode for fun, and who learned to run under the wagon when he got tired of it.

“I remember our first electric lights, indoor plumbing, first auto (a model T 1914 Ford with straight fenders in front) bought in 1918, our first radio (a Fada with a cone speaker). In the 'twenties' I saw my first airplane flying between white puffs of clouds over our house.

¹ *Recollections of Early Wichert Days*, by Tunis Romein II, provided by Libby (Romein) Bartley, Tunie's daughter

“During sweet corn picking we would work all day harvesting the crop, loading it on a truck, and traveling most of the night to deliver the produce to Waterstreet Market or Randolph Street Market in Chicago. We would get back around 4 a.m., get a few hours sleep, and be back in the fields at the regular time for another day’s work.

“During Depression times it was not only financial troubles but also the drought which was a scourge for the farmers. Times were really hard. The big event of the week was a trip to the store on Saturday night, followed by a treat of ice cream and peanuts. We got along by having our own cows supplying milk, cream, and butter. Eggs were traded for groceries. Much food was canned and stored for the winter months. Many women worked in the fields along side their husbands during the summer, with babies in the buggies, and children helping with the work.

“The ‘twenties’ was a wild time, especially for young people. The Dixie Highway [U.S. Route 1] which passed near our house was a death trap. Some 17 people, if I remember correctly, were killed on that highway within a few miles of our house during my growing up years. Not more than a quarter mile from our house was the Rainbow, a huge dance hall which was also a wild place until one night it went up in flames with pieces of burning debris falling not far from the house.

“Our winter recreation was mainly skating, sledding, and hunting. We would skate long distances on the frozen dredge ditches, often falling through when we hit hollow ice. We would walk a couple miles to the sand hills to do our sledding which was great sport because most of the terrain in the area was very flat. We also skated at Landau’s pond close to St. Anne, and I remember on one occasion trying to skate backwards, falling, and breaking through the ice, getting soaked from head to toe.

The temperature was around zero, and by the time I walked home my clothes were solid ice. We often hunted rabbits by chasing them in the snow until they got tired, picking them up and playing with them, and then letting them go. I also tried trapping muskrats to earn a little extra money, but it did not work out well.”



Tunie and Clara helped their parents by doing chores. The task Clara hated most was gathering eggs and, as a result, she avoided eating eggs and chicken the rest of her life.

Early on, both Tunie and Clara displayed kindness toward all living beings, a trait that may have seemed to be just a wee bit less evident at times in Tunie's relationship with his little sister. For example, when Tunie and Clara had to walk nearly two miles through all kinds of weather to reach Wichert Grade School where they were students, Tunie would run ahead in spite of his mother's admonition to walk slowly and take care of Clara. Tunie seemed not to possess a "slow" speed so, invariably, he took off as soon as they were out of Elizabeth's sight, jumping fences and taking short-cuts through farmers' fields. It was unlikely Tunie was being deliberately unkind in leaving Clara behind. Rather, he was so filled with energy and high spirits, he couldn't contain himself. Clara said she was never upset about being left behind because she learned to take care of herself and she always made it to school with no problems.

The fact that Clara was five years younger than her big brother didn't seem to faze her a bit. In one of her favorite stories, Clara related how, as an eight-year-old, she "put a stop" to the merciless teasing she was receiving from one of Tunie's friends by delivering a solid punch right in the boy's face, giving him a black eye. Neither the boy who was teasing Clara nor any of Tunie's other friends ever bothered her again.



Tunie

Harry and Elizabeth instilled in their children a deep respect for education. Tunie fulfilled this respect when he became the first person in Wichert to attend college. In 1936, Tunie graduated from Wheaton College in Chicago where he led the basketball team as captain and set a pole vaulting record that stood for 20 years.

Tunie served in the United States Army from 1942 to 1945 in the Middle Eastern and Asian theaters. While in the Army, he met Lt. Sarah (Sally) Harris, an Army nurse, whom he married in Assam, India, on January 23, 1945. This was the same day Clara's older daughter was born; however, they did not know this until months later. Since Sally was an officer and Tunie was an enlisted man, they conducted their courtship in secrecy because of the Army's ban on "fraternization" between officers and enlisted personnel. Read Tunie's account of their relationship in *Tea for Two* in this folder.

While serving in Assam, Tunie was granted leave by the Army to undertake an expedition into the Naga



Pole vaulting at Wheaton College

Hills in Northern India to live with the Naga headhunters for several weeks. There was no doubting his experience with headhunters when he displayed an actual shrunken head the tribe had presented him. When Tunie completed his master's degree in physical education at the University of Kentucky, he wrote his thesis on his experience with the Nagas.

In 1953, Tunie completed his doctorate in education and philosophy at the University of Kentucky. The University published his doctoral dissertation in 1954 in a book entitled *Education and Responsibility*². The dissertation focused on the disquiet experienced by educators over the failure of the public school system to develop moral responsibility in America's youth after religious training was banned.

In 1955, Tunie became professor of philosophy at Erskine College in Due West, South Carolina. In 1971, he stood up for the courage of his convictions, another trait he learned from his parents, when he disagreed with the direction in which the college was headed and he left his position to serve as an administrator for various public schools in Due West.



Tunie was an active member of the Due West Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church for nearly 50 years, serving as deacon, elder, teacher, and musician. He also served on numerous church committees and as a representative of the church at presbytery and synod meetings. A self-taught musician, he was proficient at playing the piano, organ and accordion and he performed widely in the area.

In January, 2000, the town of Due West observed "Tunis Romein Day" in honor of Tunie's years of community and Christian service.

Dr. Tunis Romein II passed away September 29, 2004 and is buried beside Sally and their son, Dr. Tunis Romein III, in the Due West Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church Cemetery.

² *Education and Responsibility*, Tunis Romein, Ph.D., University Press of Kentucky, First Edition, 1954; Re-released July 15, 2014.



Clara

Clara was intelligent and she dreamed of attending college like her brother. When the Great Depression paralyzed the nation, however, she was forced to go to work cleaning the home of one of her neighbors to bring in funds for the family. The woman was demanding and stingy, giving Clara only a few dollars a week for doing a great deal of hard work, but Clara never complained because she knew her family needed the money.

Clara's one true love was Fred Vander Meer, whom she had known her entire life. The Vander Meer family lived a short distance "across the field" from the Romein home. All they had to do was walk through one field, cross a rickety wooden bridge over an irrigation ditch which separated the Romein and Vander Meer properties, and then walk through another field. When they were teenagers, before Fred owned a car, he and Clara frequently took the "short-cut" across the fields to see one another.

Fred and Clara were married December 2, 1943, a beautiful winter day in the midst of World War II. A few years later, in the late 1940's, the couple was caught up in a tragic struggle that took place within Fred's family, and Clara found she had to draw upon the strength of character and sense of independence she had learned growing up in Harry and Elizabeth's family. Fred had been involved in a joint farming operation with his family; however, through no fault of his own, he was summarily disinherited and left to fend for himself.



Sharing a snowdrift with Patsy

Lies were spread about Fred and Clara to the extent they were "shunned" by the members of the Wichert Church where they had worshipped their entire lives. Clara's daughter recounts her early memories of the evenings Clara came home crying after she attended her ladies society meetings because no one would speak to her.

Fred and Clara were forced to make their own way on their small gladiolus farm. Fred suffered from painful, life-long, debilitating rheumatoid arthritis. It required a great deal of determination on his part to work because he was in constant agony. Clara was determined to help her husband so she endured long, tedious hours every day of the

gladiolus growing season standing at a “grading table” to sort the glads by size and “bunch” them into groups of twelve by placing them in an apparatus that fastened a string around them.

Her older daughter sat at the head of the table playing quietly while Clara pushed her younger daughter’s stroller back and forth with her foot. As her two daughters became older, they helped in the fields by doing chores such as weeding, moving irrigation pipes throughout the acres of thirsty crops, and “picking” glads and carrying them to the barn where they were bunched.

Fred also planted wheat, rye, soybeans, and corn, rotating the crops to protect the nutrients in the soil. The income Fred made from the sale of glads and grain crops often was meager, depending on the supply and demand which dictated the going market price for his produce. One year, a violent hailstorm flattened everything, creating an especially difficult time. On a Sunday during that summer, Fred had only a dollar bill and a dime, so he and Clara placed the dollar bill in the offering plate at the Sunday evening service. They literally had only one dime left to their name. The following day, another Wichert farmer and long-time friend of the family came over and handed Fred \$200 to pay for glad bulbs he wanted to purchase. In those days, \$200 was a lot of money – and it certainly was a Godsend for the Vander Meer family.



In time, the lies that had been spread throughout the community and family were exposed and ties were re-established. In the Christian spirit of compassion and mercy, Fred and Clara forgave the people who had treated them with such heartlessness.

Clara took an active role in the life of their church, teaching Sunday School and catechism classes for several years. A self-taught musician like her brother, Clara served as a church organist for thirty years, expressing her love for her Savior through the inspired music she created. She often accompanied choirs, groups, and soloists on the piano as well. When she retired from her ministry of music, her fellow congregants expressed their deep appreciation for her gentle spirit and her Christian witness.

As Harry and Elizabeth entered their senior years, they experienced health issues which prevented them from remaining in the home where they had lived since they moved to

Wichert. Since Fred had passed away, Clara sold their farm, moved into her parents' home, and helped her parents settle into a mobile home across the driveway. Later, after Harry passed away, Elizabeth moved back into the house with Clara.

After both of her parents had passed away, Clara moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan to be close to her daughters and her grandchildren. For the first time in her life, she was free from the burden she carried of the memories of her difficulties in Wichert. She enjoyed her final years, taking pleasure in her life with her family and socializing with many new friends from her church and Bible Study groups.



Clara purchased a car and learned how to drive so she could get out and travel around the city. Later, when her older daughter moved to Chicago, she coached Clara on how to navigate the busy major expressways between Grand Rapids and Chicago so she could visit, a trip she bravely undertook numerous times.

When Clara passed away on March 17, 1992 in Grand Rapids, she was brought back to Wichert where she was buried in the Oakwood Cemetery beside her beloved husband.